

## **Valhalla Inn**

### Description

The property at 1 Valhalla Inn Road is worthy of inclusion on the City of Toronto Inventory of Heritage Properties for its cultural heritage value and interest. Located on the east side of Highway 427 between Bloor Street West (south) and Burnhamthorpe Road (north), the first phase of the Valhalla Inn was completed in 1963 according to architectural plans and records housed at the City of Toronto Archives.

### Statement of Cultural Heritage Value

#### **Design or Physical Value**

The Valhalla Inn is recognized as an important example of a period “motor inn” distinguished by its application of natural materials, courtyard plan, and decorative program. The building type originated in North America during the 1920s with the availability of the automobile, the growth of the middle class with the income and leisure time for travel, and the desire for accommodation with parking along the rapidly expanding highway systems. Motor inns combined the free parking, direct access to suites and low scale of motels (the word is a contraction of “motor” and “hotel”) with the amenities offered by hotels. Independently operated motels remained the norm until the early 1950s with the introduction of lodging chains, including the Valhalla Inn.

The Valhalla Inn chain was named for the mythical resting place for Viking warriors who died in battle. The original design of the Etobicoke complex reflected the Viking theme, with a colourful exterior mural beside the main entrance (the mural has been removed) and the decor in the Nordic Dining Lounge and the subterranean Mermaid Lounge. The latter was designed to wrap around the bottom of the exterior swimming pool and provided observation windows to view the swimmers above (the Mermaid Lounge was altered in the 1980s). Wood, in its natural weathered form or treated with stain or varnish, was applied for both exterior and interior cladding and decoration. Cedar was used for the patterned facing on the exterior, as well as for the shingles covering the distinctive dual-pitched Oasthouse roofs that marked the location of the interior dining lounge.

The first phase of the Valhalla Inn featured a sunken central courtyard with a service wing on the west that housed the entrance lobby, dining facilities, service areas and an open-air pool. On the north and south ends, single-storey outer wings providing direct access to parking were flanked by parallel two-storey inner wings overlooking the courtyard. Alterations to the property over time included the addition of a second south wing running parallel to the original (the second wing was the only portion of the complex not designed by the original architectural firm), the construction of a multi-storied tower at the east end of the complex, and interior changes.

The Valhalla Inn was profiled in a 1964 issue of Canadian Art, which described it as “a very nice blend of detail and forms in the use of fieldstone and exposed timber” where “warm textures and intimate scale make this particularly effective” (January-February 1964, 29).

### **Historical or Associative Value**

The Valhalla Inn is linked to the evolution of Etobicoke from its origins as a rural township in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to its status as a township in 1967. After World War II, the predominantly rural setting of Etobicoke was transformed with a surge in population and industry. The Valhalla Inn was completed on the east side of Highway 27 (now 427) to offer guests direct access via the thoroughfare to the airport at Malton (now Pearson International Airport), destinations in downtown Toronto, and local recreational outlets including Woodbine Racetrack. The architectural periodicals of the day also described the Valhalla Inn as a popular entertainment venue attracting clientele from the local community.

The Valhalla Inn is an important surviving project in Toronto by the architectural firm headed by George Robb (1923-1991). During a practice lasting 45 years, Robb was also an associate professor at the University of Toronto’s Faculty of Architecture from 1948 until his retirement in 1982. Among Robb’s best known commissions in Toronto was the Shell Tower (later known as the Bulova Tower), a freestanding structure containing a clock and observation deck that was a landmark on the grounds of Exhibition Place following its construction in 1955. The demolition of the tower thirty years later led to a public outcry over the increasing loss of the unheralded buildings and structures expressing the Modern Movement in architecture in Toronto. In 1988, Robb received the inaugural Community Service Award from the OAA for his professional advocacy and, following his untimely death, was nominated to the Honour Role of the OAA. The firm George Robb Architect continues today under the leadership of partners Peter Stewart and Donald F. Scott.

Robb’s design for the first phase of the Valhalla Inn was recognized with an Ontario Association of Architects (OAA) design award. The citation noted that the award was in connection with a tourism industry program conducted by the OAA with provincial cooperation “to give public recognition to those buildings whose high standard of design constitute an important contribution and example to the tourist industry of the province.” George Robb also designed the interior light fixtures and many of the furnishings, including the Viking-themed bar that remains in the Nordic Dining Lounge. Robb’s firm prepared the plans for the alterations and additions to the Valhalla Inn, apart from the southernmost wing.

### **Contextual Value**

With its location on the east side of Highway 427, the Valhalla Inn is visually prominent in Etobicoke. It contributed to the development of the area bordering the highway between Bloor Street (south) and Burnhamthorpe Road (north), where the Etobicoke

Civic Centre (1958) on The West Mall south of Burnhamthorpe Road is recognized on the City's heritage inventory.

#### Heritage Attributes

The heritage attributes of the Valhalla Inn related to its design, historical and contextual value as a well-crafted example of a motor hotel associated with the development of Etobicoke where it is a recognized feature on Highway 427 are found on the portions of the west façade, roof, and interior described below. On the principal (west) façade, the massive fieldstone piers placed south of the main entrance and at the north end of the flat-roofed section with the distinctive Oasthouse roofs mark the extent of the west façade included in the Reasons for Listing. The wall is clad with a mixture of Cooksville brown bricks and cedar set in a diagonal pattern. Protected by an extended porte cochere with a flat roof, the main entry retains the original double doors and transoms that are patterned with tiny squares and flanked by glazing. On the interior, the main-floor lobby (inside the entrance doors), the Nordic Dining Lounge to the north, and the hallway along the east end of the Nordic Dining Lounge display stone-clad walls and wood ceilings with exposed timbers. The original bar, in the shape of a Viking ship, is a feature in the Nordic Dining Lounge. On the lower level, the Mermaid Lounge retains its tiled wall entrance, its rounded walls and central bar clad with ceramic tile, as well as the distinctive mermaid motifs.